

Public Statement

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Algeria: Immediate action needed to prevent further protest killings

"The Algerian authorities must take immediate action to ensure no more lives are put at risk during the policing of protests," Amnesty International said today, on the eve of the first anniversary of the death in custody of a Kabyle schoolboy.

More than 80 unarmed demonstrators were shot dead by the security forces in protests following the death last year, but those responsible have still not been brought to justice. The ongoing impunity from which they benefit continues to erode the public's already depleted confidence in the rule of law in the country.

Action to protect the lives of protesters in Algeria is all the more urgent in the chilling light of the killing of some 10 unarmed demonstrators, including one allegedly aged only 14, and the injuring of dozens more by members of the security forces at the end of March and beginning of April 2002. The killings have taken place in the predominantly Amazigh (Berber) region of Kabylia in northeastern Algeria.

Some of the demonstrators are reported to have been shot dead with live ammunition, some to have been beaten or stabbed to death, and others to have died after being hit by rubber bullets or tear-gas grenades aimed at protesters' heads. The killings have occurred during the dispersal by the security forces of demonstrations about deteriorating socio-economic conditions and the arrest of hundreds of demonstrators following previous protests.

"The violations are a shocking reminder of the authorities' continuing lack of respect for the most basic human rights of its citizens," Amnesty International said. "Lethal force appears to have been used recklessly and unlawfully against demonstrators when lives were not in danger."

Tomorrow sees the first anniversary of the killing of schoolboy Massinissa Guermah, who died after being shot by a member of the security forces while being held in the custody of the gendarmerie in Kabylia. Following his death demonstrations erupted inside and outside the region. During the months of April to June 2002, more than 80 unarmed protesters were killed by the security forces and hundreds more were injured.

An official commission of inquiry established by the authorities to look into the killings in Kabylia last year published a preliminary report in July 2001. It concluded, significantly, that the gendarmerie and other security forces had repeatedly resorted to excessive use of lethal force. In its final report of December 2001 the commission was forced to concede that it could not complete its mission because many witnesses were too afraid to speak to it.

Announcements by the authorities that the individuals responsible for the killings would be brought to justice have not been followed up. Although the authorities say they have detained some 25 members of the gendarmerie on charges of murder and firearms abuse in the context of the

demonstrations in Kabylia last year, 12 months on from the start of last year's wave of killings in Kabylia, no member of the security forces is known to have been prosecuted for unlawful killings or other human rights violations.

If further deaths are to be avoided during ongoing demonstrations in Algeria, the authorities must ensure, as a matter of urgency, that security forces comply with international standards governing the conduct of law-enforcement officials and the use of force and firearms and thereby respect and protect the right of life. These standards stipulate that security forces should apply non-violent means as far as possible before resorting to the use of force, and may only use lethal force when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life and when non-lethal means have been exhausted.

"They failed to apply those standards last year. They have failed again recently and, if no action is taken by the authorities to ensure that those standards are applied now, there is a serious risk that more unarmed protesters will be unlawfully killed," the organization warned.

Amnesty International calls on the authorities to ensure that full and independent investigations are conducted into all the killings of demonstrators during recent protests and that the alleged offenders are brought to justice in proceedings which meet international fair trial standards.

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